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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to determine the influence on parents of televised warnings about content unsuitable for children and to determine parents' attitudes toward such warnings. Researchers conducted interviews in 422 homes and distributed questionnaires with Likert-type and frequency scale items. While parents recognized and observed the warnings, the multiple regression analyses revealed that the parents who were influenced by the warnings were those who came to the viewing situation already active in regulating and monitoring their children's television viewing. The results suggest that television networks should supplement the warning statement system with efforts to increase the involvement of parents in overseeing their children's television viewing. The warnings would then influence greater numbers of active parents and increase the effect of the warnings on the audience for which they are intended.
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PARENTAL DISCRETION ADVISED:

TELEVISED WARNING STATEMENTS AND PARENTAL ATTITUDES

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ABSTRACT

A random sample of parents in a mid-Atlantic community were surveyed on their attitudes toward and influence of the televised warning statements used by networks to alert parents of potentially unsuitable content for younger viewers. While the warnings were recognized and used by parents, multiple regression analyses revealed that the parents who were influenced by the notices were the ones who came to the viewing situation already active in regulating and monitoring their child's television viewing selections. The authors suggest that networks supplement the warning statement system with efforts to increase the involvement of parents in overseeing their children's television viewing. The warnings would then interact with greater numbers of active parents and increase the influence of the warnings on the audience for which they are intended.

PARENTAL DISCRETION ADVISED:
TELEvised WARNING STATEMENTS AND PARENTAL ATTITUDES

Unlike the distributors of motion pictures, the distributors of television programming--the networks--have operated without an elaborate classification code system for alerting parents that a program may be unsuitable for younger viewers. Instead, two avenues for providing advisories to viewers--especially parents--have been pursued by the networks: program guides and broadcast warning statements.

The first kind of parental warning system functions through the distribution, and presumed use, of program guides. These guides, distributed by networks to schools and to affiliates which, in turn, distribute them to the public, offer information to parents about program content. In fact, the networks appear to believe that program guides can serve to boost the audience for a program.¹ For the mini-series Kennedy, for example, nearly 150,000 guides were distributed.² While Heald found that the receipt of television viewing guides can result in parents discouraging their children from seeing programs,³ guides are not a substitute for a broadcast warning system. Guides fail to have the immediacy or program adjacency, nor, in comparison to program viewership, the circulation. Further, some see program guides simply as avenues for promotion rather than for education.⁴

The method most used by networks to warn parents about program content is the broadcast advisory notice, or warning statement. These statements, such as "Parental Discretion Advised," precede and sometimes are interspersed within programs. Two vivid examples of the use of the broadcast warning statement were for the ABC programs, The Day After and Something About Amelia. The advisory for The Day After warned parents that the program might not be suitable for younger viewers and followed weeks of pre-broadcast discussion about both the

program's depiction of the aftermath of a nuclear war and the possible impact of the program on younger viewers. The latter example, Something About Amelia, while reacted to favorably by critics for its handling of the troubling topic of incest,⁵ nevertheless represents a more typical example of a parental warning about a made-for-TV movie with a sexually-oriented theme.

In 1978, Wurtzel and Surlin reported the findings of an October 1976 telephone survey of adult residents of Athens, Georgia concerning attitudes toward, and use of, television advisory statements.⁶ While 96% of the residents were familiar with the warning statements, they found that the statements were perceived as more valuable and influential by those respondents who had children living at home. Yet, follow-up studies investigating the attitudes of parents in particular do not appear to have been undertaken.

Further, according to Wurtzel, now an executive at ABC, television is now handling in a more sophisticated manner many themes it had dealt with in the past and addressing many issues in its entertainment programming that previously it did not explore. Additionally, Wurtzel noted, some programs which carried advisory notices in years past might not necessarily carry them if broadcast today. Considering the greater willingness on the part of television to tackle more sensitive themes, Wurtzel believes that "advisory statements have become an important aspect" of a parental warning system.⁷

The importance attached by networks to the advisory statements, the lack of a formal content rating system such as that used for motion pictures, the results of the Wurtzel and Surlin study showing the warnings as more valuable to parents, and the apparent lack of study of the advisory statement issue since Wurtzel and Surlin's 1976 survey, led us to study current parental attitudes. This investigation was conducted as part of a larger study on television and family communication and, as such, is not a replication of Wurtzel and Surlin. However,

it addresses some similar issues on which some comparisons can be based.

Specifically, four research questions were posed:

- RQ1. Do parents think there should be televised parental warning statements?
- RQ2. Do parents indicate that they frequently see the parental warning statements?
- RQ3. Do the warnings influence parent's decisions as to the suitability of a program for their child's viewing?
- RQ4. Do parents advocate the imposition of a movie-type rating system for television programs?

METHOD

Survey respondents. Trained interviewers visited 844 randomly selected homes in a mid-Atlantic community for a study on television and family communication. The list of addresses used to contact respondents was selected by computer from the universe of all addresses in the city. Of the 844 homes visited by the interviewers, 422 (50%) agreed to participate in the study, 118 (14%) refused, and 304 (36%) were not at home. Of the 422 homes in the study, 183 had at least one child under the age of 18 living at home. Thus the sample of 183 parents comprises the respondents for the results reported here. This sample of parents was composed of 132 (72.1%) females and 51 (27.9%) males; 165 (90.2%) were white, 13 (7.1%) were black, 3 (1.6%) were Asian, 1 (0.5%) was Hispanic, and 1 (0.5%) was undetermined. Mothers' mean age was 38 years while fathers' mean age was 41 years. Mothers averaged "some higher education" while fathers' mean education was slightly higher, falling between "some higher education" and "higher education degree."

Procedures. Interviews were conducted at respondents' homes. The parent who answered the door was asked to respond to the survey questionnaire. If someone

other than the parent answered the door, the interviewer asked to see a parent. The parent who then came to the door was interviewed. Interviewers were instructed to attempt to visit each home during a weekday, on a weeknight, and on a weekend in an attempt to obtain responses. All interviews were completed during a ten day period at the end of October 1982.

Questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of Likert-type and frequency-scale items. Demographic variables included race and sex of parent/respondent; parents' education and television viewing habits; household TV viewing habits; age, sex, and television viewing habits of the oldest child under 18 living at home; and number of television sets in the household. The respondents also were queried on the extent to which they coviev with their children and regulate and monitor their child's viewing. For the purposes of distinguishing between two methods of measuring parental involvement, a distinction was drawn between regulating and monitoring. Regulating was operationalized through an agreement/disagreement Likert scale response to the item "I usually regulate my child's program selection." Monitoring, on the other hand, was assessed through the question "How much of your child's viewing time of these types of programs is monitored, regulated, or controlled by you? This would include not allowing your child to watch a show, allowing only a limited viewing of it, or allowing viewing only at certain times when a parent is present." This question was asked in regard to 11 program types⁸ and the score was averaged. It was hoped that, if parents were forced to assess their monitoring in regard to specific program types, results might be more accurate than the overall evaluation provided by the regulation question. The analyses focuses on parental responses as they refer to the oldest child under 18 living at home, because many families participating in the survey had only one child.

RESULTS

The results presented first refer directly to the research questions stated earlier.⁹ Multiple regression analyses on three items of interest are then presented.

The answer to the first research question--Do parents think there should be televised parental warning statements?--is overwhelmingly yes. Nine out of ten parents (90.9% N=160) strongly agreed or agreed that such warning statements should be broadcast for programs which may contain material not suitable for younger viewers. Only six respondents (3.4%) expressed disagreement, none "strongly disagreed," and 10 parents (5.7%) neither agreed nor disagreed.

The second research question posed "Do parents indicate that they frequently see the parental warning statements?" Although not as overwhelmingly as the first, the answer to this question appears to be clearly yes. More than seven out of 10 parents either strongly agreed or agreed (73.7%, N=129) with the statement "I frequently see [parental warning] notices." Only 14.2% (N=25) disagreed or strongly disagreed with that statement; 12% (N=21) gave the neutral response.

Research question #3 addressed the issue of whether the warnings influenced parent's decisions about the suitability of a program for their child's viewing. To this Likert-type item, nearly three-fourths of the parents responded either strongly agree (23.5%, N=43) or agree (50.8%, N=93) that the program warnings do influence their decisions. Only 13.1% (N=24) disagreed or strongly disagreed with that stance, while 12.6% (N=23) neither agreed nor disagreed. Thus the warnings are perceived by parents to be influential in their decisions about their child's selections.

The final research question concerned parental views regarding the necessity of rating television programs in a manner similar to that used by motion pictures, i.e., the G-PC-R-X system. Six out of ten parents either strongly agreed (13.1%,

N=23) or agreed (46.6%, N=82) that it is necessary for television programs to be rated using a system similar to that used for classifying movies. However, a quarter of the sample disagreed or strongly disagreed (25.6%, N=45). Twenty-six parents (14.8%) neither agreed nor disagreed.

Thus while parents think there should be warnings, see them on television, and find them influential, the generally overwhelmingly nature of the agreement is less conclusive on the item concerning the necessity of a movie-type rating system for television programs than on any of the other items. To more fully explore the determinants of parental attitudes, multiple regression analyses¹⁰ using dummy variable coding where appropriate were performed on the three variables of greatest interest: (1) general attitudes toward the warnings as expressed in the belief that there should be such notices, (2) the influence of the warnings on parental decisions concerning the suitability of a program for their child's viewing, and (3) parental attitudes concerning the necessity that television programs be rated similarly to movies. The results of these analyses are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 About Here

For the first dependent variable of interest, the parental belief that there should be TV warning statements, there are a number of significant predictors. Those influenced by the warnings strongly believe that there should be such notices. While this might well be expected, the other significant predictors forge an interesting pattern of response. The fewer number of sets in the home, the less the child watches television, the greater amount of parent-child coviewing, the more parental encouragement of the child to watch informative programs, and the less parental belief that TV has positive effects on a child's learning all are associated with the parental belief that there should be warning statements. This

set of predictors suggest that parents who have some skepticism about television and who make some attempt to direct (as distinct from regulate or monitor) their child's viewing believe that there should be parental warning notices for programs which may contain material not suitable for younger viewers.

For the second regression model, parents' general belief that there should be warnings on television is strongly related to the influence of the warnings in parental decisions about program suitability. Similarly, those parents who indicate that they usually regulate their child's program selection are influenced by the warnings. The level of parental monitoring of the child's viewing also is significant. Parents who monitor are more likely to be influenced by the warning statements. The amount of television viewed by the child is negatively related to the influence of the warnings on parental decisions. The more television viewed per day by the child the greater the influence of the warnings on parents. None of the demographic or family conflict variables were significant predictors. These results suggest that parents who take a more active interest in their child's viewing by regulating/monitoring the child's viewing are the parents who are the most influenced by the warnings.

For the third regression analysis, concerning parental views on the necessity of a movie-type rating system for television programs, none of the items were significant save one. The only significant predictor, interestingly, was the item "Our family arguments and conflicts frequently pertain to television viewing." Those parents who agreed with that statement were less in favor of the movie-type system for television.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicate widespread parental recognition of the warning statements and support for the notions that the advisory notices should be

broadcast and are used by parents in judging the suitability of a program for their child's viewing. Yet, some interesting differences emerge between beliefs that there should be such notices and the influences of them on parents. While the results of the frequency scale items show great agreement among parents that there should be notices for programs with potentially unsuitable content, and that they are influenced by them, the results of the multiple regression analyses are instructive as to the emergent differences.

The different predictors which emerge on the first and second multiple regression analyses suggest that, while parents may be concerned about television's influence and may encourage their child to watch informative television and may, in fact, take the time to coviev with their child, only in the second multiple regression analysis do regulation and monitoring become significant predictors. Parents who regulate their child's viewing and who monitor are influenced by the warnings. This suggests that the parent who is actively involved in the regulating/monitoring of their child's viewing sees the warning statements as salient communications. The result that those who think there should be warnings are in fact influenced by them appears a matter of reinforcement. Yet, it also is an indication that the parents concerned enough to agree that the warning notices are important are the ones influenced. It is also interesting to note the differences between the results for the regulation variable and for the monitoring variable. The more general regulation variable is the stronger predictor in the second regression model, yet the monitoring variable may be the more accurate reflection of reality and the extent to which parents in the sample actually oversee the viewing habits and program selection of their children. It appears that a fruitful area for research is the more accurate measurement of parental monitoring. This aspect seems particularly appropriate for ethnographic research methods. The regression analyses for these two items--regulation and

monitoring--suggest that the warning notices, to be influential, need to interact with active parents.

In the present study, 74.3% of the sample strongly agreed or agreed that the warning notices influenced their decisions about program suitability. This represents an increase from the Wurtzel and Surlin study. They reported that "54% of the respondents with children reported that the warnings had influenced their decision to permit their children to watch the show."¹¹ There are at least four explanations for this increase. First, the increase may result from increased use of the advisory statements by networks and thus increased use by parents. Second, it may result from the combination of increased use by the networks and the more sophisticated or sensitive nature of the programs to which the advisories are attached. Third, an explanation may lie in the possibly increased attention paid by parents to their child's television viewing habits, especially given the extensive efforts by many groups, including schools and citizen organizations, to encourage parents to take an active interest in their children's television viewing selections. Fourth, and finally, we must be ever mindful of the effect of question wording. Roper has provided clear examples and a persuasive argument concerning the effect of question wording on responses.¹²

Wurtzel and Surlin also reported in their survey of adults (which included nonparents) that as education increased the influence of the advisories decreased and as age increased the influence of the advisories increased.¹³ In the present study of parents neither education nor age were significant predictors for the influence variable nor the other two dependent variables in the regression analyses. The difference may lie in parental vs. nonparental responses, yet further research is needed to validate this explanation.

Concerning the issue of the adoption of a movie-type rating system for television, both the present study and Wurtzel and Surlin report precisely the

same findings. In both surveys 60% of the respondents advocated a movie-type system, although in Wurtzel and Surlin this figure dropped substantially when respondents were given alternatives to the letter rating system. Direct comparison is difficult since the Wurtzel and Surlin study used adults as respondents, including nonparents, and did not report the breakdown on that item for the subsample of parents. Further, they did not report the percentage of their respondents who disagreed with the idea of a G-PG-R-X system for television. It should be noted that fully a quarter of our sample disagreed with this idea, as compared to the lower levels of disagreement for the other items. Two explanations are possible. In recent years there has been much attention paid to the issue of censorship in our mass media and to attempts by various religious, social, and political groups to affect programming. Perhaps viewing the application of a movie-type system to television as yet another eroding of the freedom to consume media materials in the privacy of one's own home, parents do not feel the trade-off is worthwhile. The second and more parsimonious explanation is that some parents might view the movie rating system as an ineffective guide for making decisions as to the suitability for children's viewing and thus its use in the television context as inadequate. Certainly the results reported by Wurtzel and Surlin that adults favor specific statements about potentially unsuitable content over a letter system is supportive of this explanation. However, this explanation and its support in noting the findings of Wurtzel and Surlin must be accepted with some caution as Wurtzel and Surlin do not mention whether the preference for a particular alternative, such as specific statements about unsuitable content, differs for parents and nonparents.

Finally, the idea of a movie-type system for television is less appealing, according to the multiple regression analysis for this item, to those parents who say that family arguments and conflicts frequently pertain to television. In

families where arguments frequently pertain to TV, the movie-type system may be perceived as yet another potential cause for argument and thus parents might see it more as a contributor to family disagreements over viewing selections than a means for family harmony.

It is clear that, with the trend toward deregulation of broadcasting and the demise of the Television Code of the National Association of Broadcasters, the warning statement may function for television in a manner similar to the function of the movie code, both to warn parents about content but also, in some measure, to provide a kind of liability insurance for the message distributor. With television broadcasters freed from even the vague guidelines of the Television Code, the increasing sophistication of television's thematic endeavors, and the frankness of such programming genres as rock videos, the advisory warning could simply become a cover behind which broadcasters can feel protected and place the burden of choice on the viewer. In some ways it may come to resemble the warning on a pack of cigarettes--ever present and universally ignored by the consumers of the product, but which in important ways protects the creator and distributor of the product from liability. One must wonder, as well, whether networks, seeing the potency of such programs as Something About Amelia in the advertising marketplace¹⁴ will produce programs with certain content for the expressed purpose of having network executives in the Standards & Practices Department attach a warning statement to them. In a study of Belgian television viewers, Herman and Leyens found that movies on television that had warning statements attracted greater viewership than those without such statements.¹⁵ If the same holds true for American television programs and made-for-TV movies, then the problem of networks producing such fare in order to get the warning statement is potentially a serious one. While the warning statement may more firmly place the viewing choice responsibility in the hands of the audience,

broadcasters need to recognize the double-edged sword that overuse of the labels might be.

As a sample of one geographical area and as a study based on self-report data, some caution needs to be exercised in generalizing from the results of the present study. Further research should attempt to increase generalizability, as well as continuing to look for changes in these attitudes. Additionally, future studies should go beyond the correlative nature of the present study to find variables which actually lead to or cause attitudes toward, and belief about, parental warnings. Field experiments might be helpful in this regard. It would be useful to know, for instance, whether increased information about the impact of television viewing on children leads to increased reliance on parental warnings. Further, we need to know more about what impact the viewing of shows which currently carry warning statements have on children to know whether such warning statements are really necessary--as opposed to simply being perceived as necessary. What effect do the warning statements have on the children themselves? Do the warnings make the show more desirable to the children? These are some of the questions that remain.

It is clear that the significant finding of this study is that parents who take an active interest in their child's viewing by regulating/monitoring viewing habits and program selections are the parents most influenced by the warning statements. The policy implication of this finding is also clear: by supplementing the advisory warning system with an effort to motivate parents to take an active role in regulating the television viewing habits of their children, networks will be more assured that the warnings will take on greater meaning for, and will be more influential on, the very audience for which they are intended.

NOTES

¹ Jack Curry, "Viewer guides: Teaching tool boosts network ratings, too," USA Today, November 17, 1983.

² Ibid.

³ Gary R. Hoald, "Television viewing guides and parental recommendations," Journalism Quarterly 57(1): Spring 1980, 141-144.

⁴ Curry.

⁵ for example, Leonard Harris on the TV program Entertainment This Week, January 7, 1984; Peter Bunzel, Los Angeles Herald-Examiner, January 8, 1984; Howard Rosenberg, Los Angeles Times, January 8, 1984.

⁶ Alan Wurtzel and Stuart Surlin, "Viewer attitudes toward television advisory warnings," Journal of Broadcasting 22(1): Winter 1978, 19-31.

⁷ Alan Wurtzel, Personal Communication, January 11, 1984.

⁸ Cartoons, After School Specials, News/Public Affairs, Dramas, Comedies, Soap Operas, Talk Shows, Educational/Public Television, TV Commercials, Sports, Movies.

⁹ Total N on the frequency items range from 175 to 183, due to missing data for some respondents on some of the items.

¹⁰ In performing the multiple linear regression analyses, we relied on the standard regression model where "each variable is treated as if it had been added to the regression equation in a separate step after all other variables had been included." See Norman H. Nie, C. Hadlai Hull, Jean G. Jenkins, and Dale S. Bent, SPSS: Statistical Package for The Social Sciences, 2nd Edition. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975), p. 336. The more conservative standard regression method used here appears the more prudent given the lack of a strong rationale suggesting a hierarchical order of entry.

¹¹ Wurtzel and Surlin, p. 23, 25.

¹² Burns Roper, "Some things that concern me," Public Opinion Quarterly 47(3): Fall 1983, 303-309.

¹³ Wurtzel and Surlin.

¹⁴ Advertising Age, "Incest film sells out," Advertising Age, January 9, 1984.

¹⁵ Ginette Herman and Jacques-Philippe Leyens, "Rating films on TV," Journal of Communication 27(4): Autumn, 1977, 48-53.

TABLE 1. Multiple Regression Analyses of TV Warning Statement Items

	Parental Belief That There Should Be TV Warning Statements		Influence of Warnings on Parental Decisions About Suitability of a Program		Parental Advocacy of Movie-Type Rating System for Television	
	BETA	F[a]	BETA	F[a]	BETA	F[a]
<u>Demographic Variables</u>						
Respondent's Sex	.07	.83	-.05	.32	.05	.32
Respondent's Race	.02	.09	-.07	.78	-.05	.33
Age of Mother	.09	.32	-.00	.00	.13	.41
Age of Father	-.09	.30	.02	.01	-.09	.21
Mother's Education	-.07	.79	.08	.82	.06	.36
Father's Education	.07	.62	-.02	.06	.04	.18
Sex of Oldest Child	-.06	.66	.02	.05	.02	.05
Age of Oldest Child	.02	.04	.07	.42	-.11	.69
Number of TV Sets in Home	.20	6.60[c]	-.10	1.44	-.11	1.28
<u>Family Conflict Variables</u>						
Family argues frequently	-.05	.32	-.09	.97	-.08	.67
Family arguments frequently pertain to TV	-.07	.80	.02	.06	-.20	4.43[b]
Belief that TV viewing helps reduce conflict between parent & child	-.04	.22	.00	.00	.07	.51
<u>Television Viewing-Related Variables</u>						
Amount of household viewing per day	.22	1.40	-.09	.32	.16	.52
Amount of parental viewing per day	-.21	1.65	.04	.05	-.14	.50
Amount of viewing by oldest child per day	.26	5.36[b]	-.27	5.40[b]	.15	1.13
Parent-child coviewing	-.24	4.97[b]	.10	.86	-.07	.30
Parental monitoring of child's viewing	.03	.13	.17	4.21[b]	-.16	2.91
Parental regulation of child's viewing	-.05	.23	.39	17.06[d]	-.02	.06
Parental encouragement of child's viewing of informative TV programs (news, educ. TV)	.24	9.17[c]	-.03	.09	.02	.03
Parental belief that TV has positive effects on child's learning	-.18	5.56[b]	-.09	1.24	.01	.02
<u>Warning Statement Variables</u>						
Parental belief that there should be warning notices for programs which may contain material not suitable for younger viewers	----	----	.36	16.14[d]	.19	3.02
Parental view that they frequently see warnings	.09	1.50	.08	1.26	-.04	.21
Influence of warnings on parental decisions about suitability of a program for child's viewing	.33	16.14[d]	----	----	.17	2.60
Parental view of necessity of G-PG-R-X for TV	.13	3.02	.13	2.60	----	----
Multiple R ²	.45	4.22[d]	.41	3.56[c]	.21	1.41

a = d.f. for MRA 23,143; for ind. var. 1,143 b = .05 c = .01 d = .001